

On the OT Texts on War

John Goldingay

1. According to Joshua 6, when the Israelites were about to take Jericho, Joshua told them, "the city and all that is in it shall be devoted to Yahweh for destruction." They duly killed all the people there. Many people in Fuller think Joshua can't have been right. It doesn't fit with what Jesus says about loving your enemies and being a peacemaker. He must have not understood God clearly. The New Testament goes beyond that.
2. The problem is that the New Testament thinks that Joshua was fine. The saintly Stephen in Acts 7 speaks of Israel's ancestors bringing the covenant ark into the land with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before the ancestors. Stephen thinks God was involved in that. Hebrews 11 speaks of the Old Testament heroes who were models of faith and among them are people who conquered kingdoms, became mighty in war, and put foreign armies to flight. Acts and Hebrews are not uneasy about Joshua in the way that we are. So did the New Testament not understand the implications of what Jesus said, whereas we do? That seems unlikely.
3. Further, through most of church history Christians in general did not think Joshua can't have been right. That thought became prominent only recently. So are we as Christians more enlightened than previous centuries? Possibly, but probably not.
4. Rather consider this possibility. Until the Enlightenment and the modern age, Christians accepted that war was a reality of human life. Only in the context of the Enlightenment and modernity did the secular world dream up the possibility of ending war and set that task before itself. So what has happened is that we have conformed our thinking to the thinking of the secular world. Our current attitude to war and peace has got nothing much to do with us being Christians.
5. But what about Jesus' talk of loving enemies and making peace? Christians sometimes talk as if this is the center of Jesus' teaching, as if he was saying something revolutionary, and as if his words inevitably generate a pacifist commitment. None of that is so.
6. First, his talk of loving enemies is not especially prominent in his teaching. There are many things he talks much more about. I think it's great for Glen to advocate peace making; I don't think it's got much to do with Jesus' priorities.
7. There was nothing revolutionary about Jesus' talk of loving enemies and peace making. Any Jew could have accepted it. It is, after all, in keeping with the scriptures, where the talk of loving your neighbor comes in the context of situations where your neighbor is your enemy. In other words, loving your neighbor means loving your enemy. When Joshua killed the Canaanites, he was not killing his enemies. They were not his enemies. There was no history of bad relations between the people of Jericho and the Israelites. The scriptures see the Canaanites as God's enemies. And Augustine said that while we are supposed to love our enemies, we are not supposed to love God's enemies.

8. Indeed, it is not only Jews who could have accepted Jesus' teaching about loving enemies and peacemaking. I was talking to a Hindu the other day and he fell into preaching me a sermon about how people needed to be more loving and forgiving and peacemaking. There is nothing distinctive about this teaching of Jesus'. Its common human wisdom. The Beatles said "All you need is love" and "Give peace a chance." So if you want to focus on what is distinctive to Jesus, love and peace making are not what is distinctive about Jesus.
9. Further, while Jesus talks about loving enemies, he talks much more about sending people to Hell. He talks about forgiving people, but also talks about people who will not be forgiven. He talks at the end of the Sermon on the Mount about the way he will say on that day," the last day, to some people who see themselves as his followers, "Go away from me, you evildoers." Jesus speaks much more about sending people to Hell than about loving enemies or peace making.
10. Jesus takes a double attitude to wrongdoers. He wants to see them saved; he is willing to see them punished. The double attitude is not surprising. This is his Father's attitude. Jesus is a man of love and a man of wrath; the God of the scriptures is a God of love and a God of wrath. Neither in God nor in Jesus are love and wrath equally balanced; love has the priority. But God and Jesus are prepared to be wrathful when necessary.
11. In connection with the Canaanites, God decided the moment had arrived. The Israelites are to take action against them because of their waywardness. One aspect of this that Deuteronomy specifies is the way they sacrificed children.
12. Sometimes when God acts, God does so directly, without using human intermediaries. Sometimes God uses human intermediaries. On this occasion, God used human intermediaries to bring judgment on the Canaanites.
13. A background concern of today's meeting is the possibility of a nation like us using Joshua as an excuse for its own war making. And part of the background for that is the assumption that anything God did in the Bible is something God might do again. The Israelites, at least, did not assume that, and I suggest they were better at understanding the Bible than we are. Israel did engage in war in the time when it was a state. That is what states do. But it never assumed that it was supposed to annihilate people. The time when the Israelites moved into Palestine was more or less the only occasion when it did that. (I say "more or less" because they also did that for the same reason as the Canaanites, that God told them to do so because of the Amalekites' distinctive wrongdoing.)
14. You could draw an analogy with the story of Abraham almost sacrificing Isaac. We do not assume that God might tell someone today that they should sacrifice their child. It is no more logical to assume today that God might tell a nation to annihilate another nation. The Israelites did not go around annihilating other nations; the Joshua story does not give any other nation a basis for doing so.
15. Deuteronomy 20 in fact makes explicit that there are different rules for war in regular circumstances from the ones that apply with regard to the Canaanites. I think there are three main theological and ethical theories

of warfare: crusade, pacifism, and just war. None of them simply comes from the Bible. They are all known elsewhere; Christians have adapted them all in different circumstances. Deuteronomy 20 offers you an amazing different theory. When you have to fight a battle, it says, this is everybody's business not the business of some people you employ because they like fighting or haven't got jobs. Decisions about what to do are made by religious and civil officials not military people. Ignore whether you have good enough armory; do the right thing and trust in God. Let the people who are afraid go home. Offer terms of peace to your enemies. Don't destroy any fruit trees. These instructions have terrific potential to constrain war.

16. What the Israelites were told to do to the Canaanites has no implications for modern warmaking. So how is it significant for us? The most important way is that it raises the question whether the same thing may happen to us as happened to the Canaanites. We are a deeply wayward culture, characterized by consumerism, militarism, violence, unfairness, and corruption. That is true about the church as it is true about the rest of the culture. As the people of God we need to repent and change and we need to work within the church for the church to repent and change. As that happens, it is possible it might have some effect on the broader culture. The danger that we are in by virtue of being people like the Canaanites is the chief significance of Joshua for us.